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**HAS THE TIME COME TO MERGE SOUTHCOM WITH ANOTHER  
UNIFIED COMMAND?**

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**A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

**19 May 2004**

## **Abstract**

### **HAS THE TIME COME TO MERGE SOUTHCOM WITH ANOTHER UNIFIED COMMAND?**

The application of a qualitative framework constructed from national security and military strategy, together with joint doctrine, demonstrates that merging the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) with the U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM), which is an option under evaluation in the current biennial review of the Unified Command Plan (UCP), will reduce the effectiveness of the UCP. Reviewing the history of both actual and postulated UCP changes sets the basis for understanding the current debate and reveals which historical arguments remain applicable today. Drawing from the numerous internal and external UCP studies, as well as guidance for past deliberations, it is possible to build an analysis framework that, if inspected for strategy and doctrine changes in the future, can be applied to any future efforts to merge, eliminate, or reshape SOUTHCOM. Using the framework for the current debate illustrates that, while the merger is not prudent, the seam between SOUTHCOM and NORTHCOM requires modification to support peacetime theater security cooperation and potential military operations .

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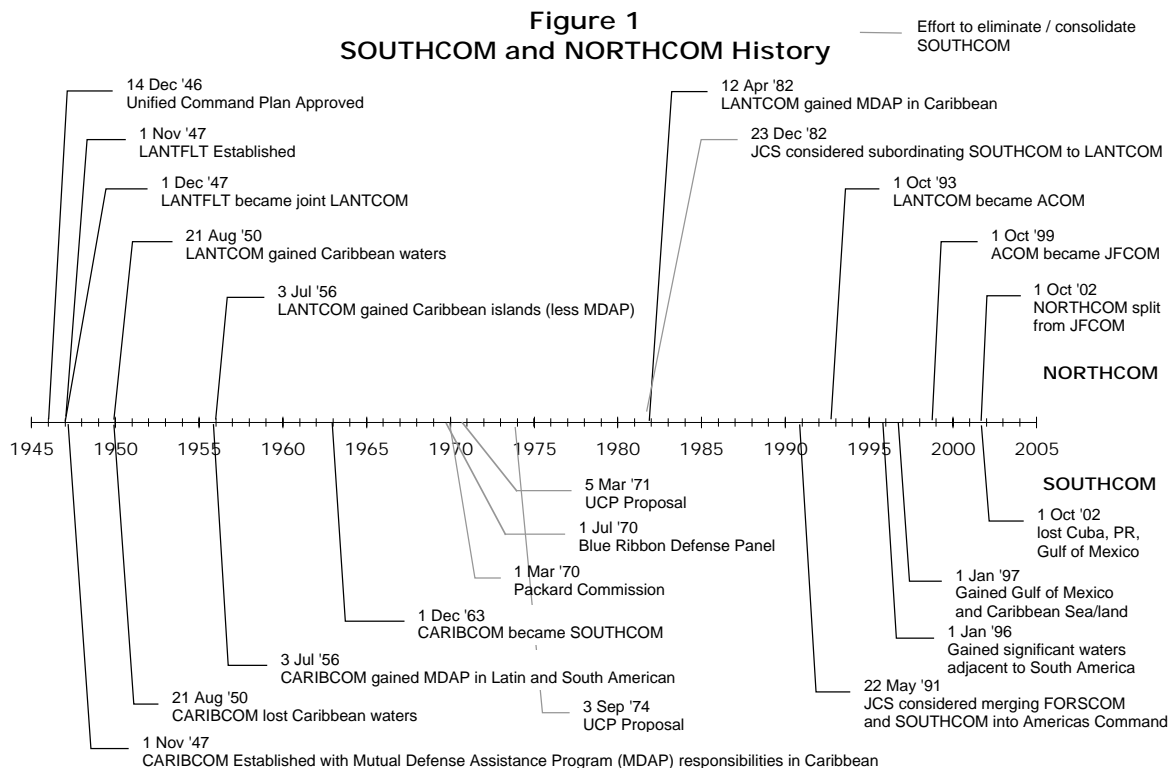
## **INTRODUCTION**

In April 2003, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the Combatant Command staffs began preparations for the next biennial revision of the Unified Command Plan (UCP). As has happened often before, one idea under consideration is the merger of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM\*) with another unified command, U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) in this case. In an era of defense transformation, properly organizing headquarters to direct military operations is an area of interest, and Secretary of Defense (SecDef) Donald Rumsfeld has identified UCP change as an important component of defense transformation.<sup>1</sup> The same observers who have cited the Department of Defense (DoD) for having “a reputation... for being incapable of changing and resistant to change,”<sup>2</sup> will evaluate the military’s achievement of significant and beneficial UCP change in a larger context—that of its commitment to transformation. Given the need to pursue well-considered change, two major questions address the appropriateness of a SOUTHCOM merger: 1) What are the historic SOUTHCOM issues, and how do they affect the current debate; and 2) Does a merger make sense from the perspective of efficiency, national strategy and joint doctrine? The answers will show that SOUTHCOM should remain an independent unified command, although the seam at the northern boundary should be modified to facilitate the theater security cooperation and counterdrug missions.

## **A REVIEW OF PAST INITIATIVES REGARDING SOUTHCOM**

To answer the first question regarding the past issues affecting SOUTHCOM and how they might apply today, one must consider the history of this unified command.

SOUTHCOM began as Caribbean Command (CARIBCOM), designated at the creation of the UCP. Figure 1, “SOUTHCOM and NORTHCOM History,”<sup>3</sup> presents the most significant events for not only SOUTHCOM but also its sister command to the north, together with the timing of some key UCP reports.



Two interesting points emerge from Figure 1. First, there has been considerable uncertainty regarding which combatant command should cover the Caribbean. Confounded, in part, by the Monroe Doctrine that sealed the relationship of the United States with the rest of the Western Hemisphere, the JCS has repeatedly struggled with defining the boundary between SOUTHCOM and its sister command to the north (whether Atlantic Command, USA Command, Joint Forces Command, or NORTHCOM). The seam resulting from this

\* The proper abbreviation is USSOUTHCOM, but, for the sake of brevity, this document will omit the 'US' from all combatant command abbreviations.

boundary is one of the major SOUTHCOM issues, and it merits further discussion below.

The second interesting point is the frequency of challenges to the existence of SOUTHCOM, both from within and without the Department of Defense (DoD). In fact, John Quinn, in one of the more detailed treatments of UCP alternatives, observed that “...the Southern Command, which several times has been spared extinction despite the repeated (and extraordinarily rare, at least when it comes to UCP issues) consensus of the JCS to the contrary, appears to be in a position to survive as a unified command—this despite the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Panama....”<sup>4</sup>

Turning to the second point of interest, the repeated attacks on SOUTHCOM’s integrity as a command, history reveals several reasons for the combatant command’s continued existence. The first two SOUTHCOM-related efforts occurred nearly simultaneously in 1970, only seven years after the command had emerged from CARIBCOM. One attempt came from [then] Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard’s study. Noting that SOUTHCOM’s independent existence was inconsistent with a policy (extant at the time) of low US visibility and with military necessity,<sup>5</sup> the study inspired disagreement within JCS, which offered what would become the de-facto defense. It was primarily a political argument: the benefits of “an area-oriented senior U.S. military command” overrode the minor reduction in forces and headquarters staff that would be achieved by eliminating the command. Their second argument was very real during the Cold War. The Soviets, having succeeded with Cuba, were pursuing an aggressive campaign to communize Latin America. Their third argument—that no one had considered how to fulfill the command’s responsibilities if it were eliminated—was effective in preserving SOUTHCOM, and would continue to block the next few attempts.



The second attack on SOUTHCOM came from outside DoD. President Richard M. Nixon charged a Blue Ribbon Defense Panel with examining DoD's management. The panel determined that the eight UCP commands in existence at the time were too numerous for effective civilian control.<sup>6</sup> Today, at a time when "...DoD's organizational structure will be streamlined and flattened to take advantage of the opportunities that the rapid flow of data and information present,"<sup>7</sup> most believe that flattening organizations is a laudable objective, and inserting a new organizational layer would likely find little support. This belief drove the panel to look for opportunities to reduce the number of commands, and it advocated simply abolishing SOUTHCOM. The vital functions of the command would be assumed by a new hemisphere command that would also be a force provider (this would be like combining NORTHCOM, Joint Forces Command, and SOUTHCOM today).<sup>8</sup> This panel made no effort to address any of the downsides to such a proposal, one of which was a marked expansion of the new command's span of control—the gist of the argument for eliminating the command in the first place.

One year later, the JCS reversed their position, and the UCP proposal submitted to President Richard Nixon advocated abolishing SOUTHCOM.<sup>9</sup> The proposal would have left all of Latin America unassigned, similar to the Soviet Union and Mexico at the time. Since the plan neglected vital responsibilities in the region, the President retained SOUTHCOM, stating that its elimination required "a clarification of the political and diplomatic implications of such a move."<sup>10</sup>

In the next round of UCP discussions in 1974, both JCS and SecDef agreed on the dissolution of SOUTHCOM, proposing a Latin American Mutual Defense Assistance Headquarters that would perform security assistance functions. Once again, the President

disapproved the recommendation, directing DoD to submit a plan to accommodate all of the eliminated missions and functions. When pressed, the department replied that the move to eliminate SOUTHCOM should be delayed until issues concerning disposition of the Panama Canal Treaty were resolved. In the interim, SOUTHCOM headquarters was to downsize as much as possible.<sup>11</sup>

Since matters regarding the Canal would not be concluded until the final withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1999, one might be tempted to think that SOUTHCOM would remain secure in the interim. This was not to be, however. Having recognized that a UCP proposal without a thorough plan to reallocate SOUTHCOM responsibilities was not likely to win approval, the Chairman of the JCS (CJCS) in 1982 suggested that the command should become a subunified command within LANTCOM.\* This new lower-level command would also regain security assistance responsibilities in the Caribbean.<sup>12</sup>

SOUTHCOM presented three opposing arguments: 1) Subordinating his command to an organization concerned primarily with a Soviet Union maritime conflict would implicitly signal to the Latin Americans that they had become less important to the United States; 2) Given the increasing Soviet intrusion into Central American affairs, such a change would limit the influence of a more junior commander in opposing the interference; and 3) The change would achieve no more than another layer of bureaucracy between the more junior commander and his civilian masters, since the subordinate organization would remain largely intact with some grade reductions.<sup>13</sup> The idea did not make it past the Secretary of Defense.

The next round of SOUTHCOM debate did not occur until 1991, when JCS considered combining SOUTHCOM with a different command, Forces Command

(FORSCOM), to form Americas Command (AMERICOM).<sup>14</sup> At the time, FORSCOM was an Army specified command, essentially a single-service force provider. Ultimately, in what was—until the UCP change of 2002, at least—one of the most sweeping changes instituted solely within DoD,\* the military marched down an entirely different path, creating USA Command (USACOM), which retained the regional responsibilities of LANTCOM along with the role of joint force provider and joint forces training, an idea the Blue Ribbon Defense Panel had suggested twenty years earlier.<sup>15</sup> While JCS wrestled with the notion of increasing USACOM's AOR to encompass Central and South America, they expressed concern over the resulting span of control, a concern that is just as valid today.<sup>16</sup>

## **EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON THE SOUTHCOM DEBATE**

During the period between the 1991 debate until the terrorist attack of 9/11, a series of post-Cold-War reports drove the UCP debate. The first of these reports, from the legislatively-derived Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces, took a unique approach toward evaluating UCP reorganization. Regarding SOUTHCOM, the report had two observations. First, it advocated the creation of a separate joint force provider,<sup>17</sup> since, in its view, USACOM (the predecessor to NORTHCOM and Joint Forces Command) could not effectively exercise both geographic responsibilities and functional responsibilities. It also made an interesting observation about AOR consolidation:

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\* The subunified command would be similar to U.S. Forces Korea, a subunified command to Pacific Command.

\* The U.S. Congress forced the issue of both TRANSCOM and SOCOM. Although one might argue SPACECOM was a creation of the JCS, the impetus for SPACECOM derived from President Ronald Reagan's Star Wars program. Besides, STRATCOM ultimately subsumed SPACECOM. Of course, the purist could argue that the Blue Ribbon Defense

In all cases [of merging AORs], we found potentially high costs associated with the CINCs' span of control and only limited cost savings. The continuing requirement for global military leadership, and increased demands for the attention of U.S. military leaders from more nations, may argue for exactly the opposite—in favor of more geographic CINCs with smaller AORs or more extensive use of sub-unified commands.<sup>18</sup>

The real value of this report,<sup>\*</sup> was that it performed its review systematically using an assessment framework. In fact, most of the principles the commission offered remain cogent to the current merger initiative. Table 1, "Principles for Periodic UCP Review,"<sup>19</sup> summarizes these principles, purportedly consulted for the next report.

**TABLE 1**  
**Principles for Periodic UCP Review**

- 1) AOR boundaries should correspond to areas of strategic interest
- 2) Size of AOR should accommodate necessary politico-military dealings; span of control must consider demographic variability, AOR size, and potential areas of conflict
- 3) Seams between AORs should not split areas of strategic interest or exacerbate demographic differences
- 4) AOR must include sufficient land, sea, air to perform exercise and training responsibilities and encompass a unified campaign against plausible adversary
- 5) Functional commands should not have AORs
- 6) Functional command responsibilities should have minimal overlap within DoD

The next commission to affect SOUTHCOM was also Congressionally-chartered, the National Defense Panel. Among other recommendations, several of which involved the UCP, this panel recommended creating an Americas Command, with two subordinates—

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Panel originated the concept of all functional commands still remaining today except for SOCOM.

<sup>\*</sup> One of the report's recommendations remains to be fulfilled: It recommended all CONUS forces, including those on the West Coast be assigned to the Joint Force Provider to ensure consistency of joint training.

Southern Command and Homeland Defense Command.<sup>20</sup> The panel claimed that it “endorses those principles [from the preceding report] and used them to determine its recommendations for realignment of the commands.”<sup>21</sup> In explaining its application of these principles, however, the panel omitted the one regarding span of control. Making SOUTHCOM a subunified command partially mitigates span of control problems, but, as the commander of SOUTHCOM and the Commission on Roles and Missions had asserted, a merged command structure would not achieve significant savings in billets or cost, other than a reduction in pay grades of senior personnel, along with a commensurate reduction in prestige relating to Latin Americans.

### **RECENT SOUTHCOM DEVELOPMENTS**

This brings the historic review up to late 1996. DoD did not receive the National Defense Panel’s recommendations in time for the UCP review then in progress, and SecDef directed the CJCS to consider the report in the next review cycle.<sup>22</sup> While the panel was deliberating, SOUTHCOM finally succeeded in gaining the entire Caribbean (until 2002, when it would again lose portions of the Caribbean). The CJCS was concerned that some unified commanders did not control sufficient water and land in their AOR to support joint operations and training, so he wanted the UCP change to correct this deficiency.\* Some of the Southern Commander’s points in advocating the Caribbean shift remain relevant to the present discussion. His first point was that gaining control of Caribbean waters and large ocean areas surrounding South America was in keeping with the Chairman’s goal. His second argument dealt with the then-existing seam in the execution of his counter-drug

mission. Owning the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea ensured unity of command, since he would control both the origin of the drugs and the ocean transit routes. Lastly, he pointed out that the proposed boundaries would align his AOR more like the Organization of American States and the State Department, thereby improving interagency and international cooperation.<sup>23</sup> Given the declining prestige of SOUTHCOM in earlier years, it is remarkable that SOUTHCOM prevailed, particularly when the Joint Staff had recommended studying the Caribbean transfer in a future review, reportedly to give SOUTHCOM time to complete its move from Panama to Miami and until the Haiti crisis of the time stabilized.<sup>24</sup>

Aside from instituting the most significant gains in SOUTHCOM's AOR since its inception, the 1995 UCP review was also remarkable for its methodology. Table 2, "Parameters for 1995 UCP Review,"<sup>25</sup> lists the parameters used for the study, some of which are similar to those of the Commission on Roles and Missions. The final point—that the changes be practical—will be particularly important in the current debate.

**TABLE 2**  
**Parameters for 1995 UCP Review**

- 1) Changes must support National Security and Military Strategies
- 2) AORs must optimize span of control
- 3) UCP must consider diplomatic and international obligations
- 4) AOR boundaries must support enduring joint operations in peace and war
- 5) UCP must maintain strategic focus to support national security interests
- 6) Changes must be doable, realistic, sellable, and affordable

The next UCP change affecting SOUTHCOM was in 2000, again increasing the command's ocean area (between the Caribbean and Africa, "squaring-off" the AOR) at the

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\* The UCP change failed in this regard, for the change left USACOM without any land larger than barrier isles, which remained to be addressed in one of the next UCP changes.

expense of Joint Forces Command (JFCOM), the new name for USACOM, in recognition of its joint training and other new joint responsibilities.<sup>26</sup>

The 2002 change was one of the most significant in the history of the UCP.<sup>27</sup> The impetus of the 9/11 attacks drove the creation of NORTHCOM and the conversion of JFCOM into a purely functional command with no AOR. The change rescinded some of the 1995 geographical additions to SOUTHCOM, reassigning Puerto Rico, Cuba, and adjacent sea areas to NORTHCOM.<sup>28</sup> Intended to redress USACOM's 1995 concern that the command had no joint training space, the reassignment of Puerto Rico later became academic due to the unforeseen loss of the Vieques training facilities. Even had JCS anticipated this loss, reigning wisdom was that Puerto Rico, as a U.S. commonwealth, belonged in NORTHCOM. The Cuba shift afforded a buffer adjacent to CONUS for defense in depth. The second aspect of this UCP change affecting the current debate was that, for the first time, one had only to merge two commands to produce the National Defense Panel's previously recommended AMERICOM.

## **HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND THE CURRENT SOUTHCOM DEBATE**

Which of the rationales for dissolution, subordination, or retention of SOUTHCOM apply to the present debate? One of the most frequent conclusions in the fifty-year debate is that the minor savings in cost and manpower achieved by converting SOUTHCOM into a subunified command are not worth the political costs to relations with Latin American governments and their militaries. This conclusion remains germane today. Recall from the historical review that SOUTHCOM UCP recommendations evolved from outright elimination to subordination. Once the first authority recommended subordination, the idea

seemed to take on a life of its own, appearing elsewhere, often with little or no justification. In the climate of the present Defense Reform Initiative, such an initiative would be contrary to organizational flattening and might not win approval on that basis alone.

Another of the original retention arguments vanished with the Cold War—the threat of Soviet efforts to destabilize or communize susceptible regimes in the region. Obviously, if the UCP decision were to be driven by this consideration alone, the merger should be pursued. Two new threats, however, counterbalance the lack of Soviet intervention. First, the Chinese Hutchinson Whampoa shipping company leased a port at either end of the Panama Canal in the late 1990s, raising fears of Chinese intervention.<sup>29</sup> Increasingly, narcoterrorists have also destabilized the region. Concerning the Colombian effort to restore stability and defeat the drug lords, General James T. Hill, current SOUTHCOM Commander states, “Although this fight is far from over, progress in this area is a terrific success story.”<sup>30</sup> While Colombia may well be on the long road to recovery, it could not have done so without both U.S. dollars and high-level military involvement. Another state in the region, Haiti, may not be so fortunate. Regarding the return of instability to Haiti, General Hill concludes, “Certainly a major contributing factor in the recent failure of his [President Aristide’s] government was the corruption of institutions that accompanies narcoterrorism. About 8% of the cocaine entering our country is tran-shipped [sic] through Haiti.”<sup>31</sup> Recent history shows that regional stability has not changed significantly with the demise of the Soviet Union; therefore destabilizing influences still support retention of the AOR.

Another reason for retaining SOUTHCOM has also vanished with the removal of standing U.S. forces from the AOR and the concurrent relocation of SOUTHCOM headquarters to Miami. Or, as with the Soviets, have events simply altered while the



underlying reason remained? After all, uninterrupted traffic through the Canal is no less of a strategic interest, and protecting this asset is more challenging now that no delaying or halting forces are in country. Again, circumstances favor keeping SOUTHCOM.

The last historical reason for retaining SOUTHCOM involved the wisdom of transferring responsibilities to LANTCOM, a command then focused on the northern and eastern Atlantic and blue water combat with the Soviet Union. While the Soviet Union orientation no longer applies to NORTHCOM, current planning efforts to utilize Second Fleet assets to board, search, or interdict shipping in an elevated terrorist threat environment may rival the old Soviet plans in complexity, albeit with different priorities.

Thus, most of the reasons for retaining SOUTHCOM either still exist (the political significance of security assistance responsibilities) or have new, but equally compelling, causes today (the destabilizing narcoterrorist influence, e.g.). History then, while useful to set the context for the current debate, leads one to conclude that any solution that merely converts SOUTHCOM from an independent to a subunified regional command is not prudent. Reaching a sensible UCP recommendation involving a merger without a subunified command must rely on an evaluation of conditions as they exist today.

## **THE 2004 SOUTHCOM DEBATE**

It is therefore time to return to the UCP review in progress. Secretary Rumsfeld stated why the merger was worthy of consideration in a press briefing:

One reason is we find any time there's a seam -- a line between two commands -- there are things that happen at that seam.... They require special coordination -- special cooperation and special attention. So to the extent you can have your seams in places that they don't cause problems, you're probably better off. And to the extent you can avoid seams -- wherever possible --

you're probably better off from a command-and-control standpoint. And the second thing is cost...and these headquarters cost a lot of money.<sup>32</sup>

With the UCP framework as it stands today, it has never been easier to create AMERICOM---only two combatant commands would be affected, and no functions would require reassignment. Understanding the historic context, CJCS approached the AMERICOM question from a new angle: Independent of any supposed economies, is a hemispheric command the best solution for hemispheric security?

To answer this question, the JCS promulgated the Terms of Reference (TOR) directing Joint Staff J-5, SOUTHCOM, and NORTHCOM personnel to study at least four alternatives, although they could develop additional options.<sup>33</sup> These are: 1) Maintain the status quo; 2) Create an Americas Command with one headquarters; 3) Establish a hemispheric command with at least one subunified command; and 4) Retain two commands while adjusting responsibilities. The CJCS, General Richard Myers, wrote on the forwarding instrument, "Ensure all study participants know there is no prejudged outcome. We want a thorough study looking at pros and cons."<sup>34</sup> Although the study is not scheduled to report out to the Secretary of Defense until June 2004, the participants have already performed an in-depth review, measuring the effectiveness of both commands under the four options considered for every mission area. It cannot be said, as the General Accounting Office did in 1995, that the participants "...did not perform any detailed or formal analyses of potential UCP changes."<sup>35</sup> The TOR provided guidance for the deliberations as well as metrics to be used to derive a recommendation. While it would be inappropriate to reveal information from the staff work in progress as a result of the TOR, interviews with JCS and SOUTHCOM action officers regarding the process and framework of the analysis<sup>36</sup> revealed that the completed study should satisfy the most demanding analyst.

That said, an alternative approach—one based upon national security and military strategy, as well as joint doctrine—should arrive at a similar conclusion. If the JCS study represents the quantitative approach, the strategy and doctrine view is its qualitative counterpart. Since others have proposed frameworks for evaluating the UCP, it would be beneficial to take their ideas, together with other strategic and doctrinal concerns to form a generic tool that could be applied to gauge the relative merits of any two UCP constructs. For the purpose of considering a SOUTHCOM merger, however, a simpler subset of criteria should suffice. Given the frequency with which activities both inside and outside DoD have challenged this command’s independence, a standardized analysis framework will prove useful over the long term. Table 3, “Factors for SOUTHCOM Merger Analysis,” lists the resulting factors, annotated as to source.

**TABLE 3**  
**Factors for SOUTHCOM Merger Analysis**

- 1) UCP must support National Security and Military Strategies and joint doctrine<sup>37</sup>
- 2) AOR boundaries should correspond to areas of strategic interest<sup>38</sup>
- 3) Boundaries of AOR should accommodate necessary politico-military dealings; must consider demographic variability, AOR size, and potential areas of conflict<sup>38</sup>
- 4) Seams between AORs should not split areas of strategic interest or exacerbate demographic differences unless overriding military considerations warrant<sup>38</sup>
- 5) Insofar as the previous two factors permit and no overriding military reason dictates otherwise, only one geographic commander should exercise day-to-day mission responsibility at any location<sup>39</sup>
- 6) Provided no overriding military reason warrants, AOR boundaries should consider boundaries of other government agencies, such as State Department<sup>40</sup>
- 7) Provided no overriding military reason warrants, and with the exception of the U.S. itself, AOR boundaries should respect appropriate collective security arrangements (e.g. NATO)<sup>41</sup>
- 8) AOR must include sufficient land, sea, air to perform exercise and training responsibilities and encompass a unified campaign against plausible adversary<sup>38</sup>

- 9) If seams must violate factors 2-8, simple, practical methods can be developed to minimize the impact<sup>42</sup>
- 10) Span of control must be manageable or consider subunified commands<sup>37,47</sup>
- 11) UCP must support deliberate planning requirements<sup>43</sup>
- 12) Is there a match between missions and assigned and/or apportioned forces<sup>44</sup>
- 13) Changes must be doable, realistic, sellable, and affordable<sup>38</sup>

Before applying these factors to develop a recommendation, several aspects of the table bear mention. For some factors, as with AOR boundaries respecting collective security arrangements (number seven), the criterion, while not explicit in the source, derives from principles therein. Lastly, the first factor regarding compliance with strategy and doctrine exists to keep the list relevant. The idea is to update the list as strategy and doctrine evolves. Thus this highly issue-specific framework could bring significant savings. JCS should be able to reduce the scope or even obviate future AMERICOM initiatives simply by dusting off the staff's last analysis, updating the framework for relevant strategy and doctrine updates in the interim, and then deciding whether to pursue another full study, to update the analysis, or to bypass the question based upon the adequacy of the previous analysis.

### **A QUALITATIVE MERGER ASSESSMENT**

The framework complete, consider its application to the current debate. Since the list is, by definition, up to date, the evaluation begins with the set of factors dealing with AOR boundaries. Collectively, these criteria determine whether span of control is optimized. Figure 2, "NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM Boundary,"<sup>45</sup> shows the current boundary between the two theaters. Notice the zipperlike seam in the Caribbean, as it is where the current UCP falls short of Table 3 principles. The first AOR criterion requires that the

bounded area correspond to strategic interests. This seems straightforward. In practice, however, misunderstanding the concept is one of the main reasons behind the impracticality of most of the UCP alternatives suggested to-date, even when they claimed to consider strategic interests, for many of them equated *military* to *strategic* interest.<sup>46</sup>

**Figure 2**  
**NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM Boundary**



Most of these alternative structures did not retain an independent SOUTHCOM, citing the low likelihood of an attack on the Panama Canal and the improbable appearance of a regional hegemony among the uniformly democratic countries in the region (other than diplomatically-isolated Cuba) as justification. What these analyses ignored was the region's importance from the perspective of other elements of national power. For example, U.S. trade with the southernmost five South American countries is over twice that of the entire Middle East.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, the AOR is of economic (and hence strategic) interest.

The AOR seems to meet the second consideration, that the area encompasses homogeneous areas as regards demographic characteristics, the nature of potential conflict areas, and politico-military dealings. In fact, this guidance suggests that SOUTHCOM's

AOR should include Mexico, Cuba, and the Bahamas, the first of several seam issues. This is also where the current UCP violates factor four (that AORs should not split strategic or demographic areas). The current UCP also violates premise five because NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM both exercise (different) missions in Mexico, Cuba, and the Bahamas, which are the security assistance responsibility of the southern commander, despite being in NORTHCOM's AOR. Since the Department of State includes these same three countries with Latin America, the UCP violates premise six. Likewise, if one considers that the Organization of American States has collective security concerns, the UCP violates factor number seven. \* Factor eight—each AOR includes sufficient space for operations and training—on the other hand, is one of the reasons the zipper seam exists. One of the 2002 UCP goals was for each commander to have both relevant land areas “and the contiguous waters out—in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, out to a minimum of 500 miles, so they can defend in depth.”<sup>48</sup> This effort was in accord with joint doctrine regarding areas of operation.<sup>49</sup>

From the framework perspective, the question here should be: Is the goal of 500 miles of water from each coast an “overriding military reason” in favor of retaining the current jagged boundary, as factors four through seven would permit? Joint doctrine recognizes that a combatant commander may have occasion to conduct operations outside his defined area, stating “unless otherwise directed by the Secretary of Defense, when significant operations overlap the boundaries of two combatant commands, a JTF will be formed and

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\* These two organizations treat the entire western hemisphere as a homogeneous whole. This would support the concept of an Americas Command. However, our NORAD responsibilities cannot be avoided, and having a separate command for Canada and the United States would require either a subunified command for SOUTHCOM or the status quo, by factor seven.

assigned an appropriate JOA. Command of this JTF will be determined by the NCA and forces transferred to the appropriate combatant commander.”<sup>50</sup> This brings the discussion to factor nine, however, which suggests that the affects of an unavoidable seam can be minimized by proper advance arrangements. The good news is that NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM have developed a Command Arrangement Agreement (CAA) that simplifies counterdrug and intelligence operations around the seam.<sup>51</sup>

Assuming for the moment that a seam of some kind will inevitably exist, what should be done to minimize its impact? The easiest part of the zipper seam to fix is the Puerto Rican tooth of the zipper. Since NORTHCOM is the homeland defense czar and Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory, then should not Puerto Rico be in NORTHCOM? If that were true, Hawaii would also be in NORTHOM. Clearly, Puerto Rico can shift to SOUTHCOM.

To address the remainder of the seam, one must consider missions assigned to the two concerned commands, together with the seam’s impact on these missions. The counterdrug mission is more critical to SOUTHCOM than any other combatant commander. General Hill makes the case that the counterdrug war is of strategic interest: “These drugs directly result in 21,000 deaths per year in the United States.... These deaths are the result of what I often call a weapon of mass destruction employed by narcoterrorists.”<sup>52</sup> The National Security Strategy identifies drug cartels and their violence as a threat to our national security, and the National Military Strategy emphasizes that the military has a key role in combating drug cartels.<sup>53</sup> The narcoterrorist is the enemy in this prolonged campaign, and, by factor eight, the AOR (whether of a combatant or subunified commander) should militarily encompass a unified campaign against a plausible adversary. The AOR therefore should include both the land and water drug transit routes.

Since Puerto Rico is easy to fix, this leaves Mexico and Cuba. As for Mexico, other than that it is in North America and might thus be included in a command named “NORTHCOM,” it is difficult to understand why, after years of remaining unassigned to any combatant commander, it is now in NORTHCOM. The Cuba side of the seam exists for the defense-in-depth reason noted above. Together with the counterdrug mission just mentioned, defense-in-depth is the other mission (NORTHCOM’s) significantly affected by the seam. Given that the zipper seam violates so many other precepts affecting unity of command of the drug war—a campaign in continuous execution—the practical solution is to make exceptions to the 500-mile rule, and the boundary should be shifted back to the year-2000 line (including all the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea almost to the latitude of the Georgia border on the north). This would bring the seam to U.S. territorial waters where law enforcement activities take over anyway. For NORTHCOM to defend in depth in SOUTHCOM’s waters (in a war much less likely than the drug war in progress), SecDef could employ the proviso in *UNAAF* to create a Joint Operations Area overlapping the two AORs, preferably in advance with a CAA. By now, it should be apparent that one cannot choose the status quo, for at the very least the seam must be corrected.

With a plan to fix the geographic problems of the seam, consider the remaining factors. Number 11 is a classified discussion, since the requirements are covered in the *Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan* (JSCP), a classified document. However, this is where the subunified command option evidences additional problems with span of control but from a functional rather than geographical perspective. Compared to existing geographic commands, AMERICOM would be unduly tasked from the standpoint of deliberate (if not crisis-action) planning requirements. Furthermore, as Senator John Warner observed in a



recent hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, "...Northern Command has got a very, very full platter right now, that [sic] I think we'd be well-advised to leave things status quo for the present time."<sup>54</sup> Another *JSCP* (and the "Forces for Unified Commanders" memorandum) issue is embodied in number 12, apportioned (and assigned) forces. The details are again classified, but SOUTHCOM maintains an extremely small footprint, and this factor has minimal bearing on the decision at hand.

This brings the evaluation to the last factor—practicality. All of the foregoing issues with the seam could be eliminated if the seam itself went away, and these were precisely the kinds of problem to which Secretary Rumsfeld was referring in his seam comment. As he pointed out, abolishing SOUTHCOM can eliminate the seam, but is this practical? This central question devolves to one of span of control. Can one commander handle all assigned missions throughout the hemisphere without subunified commands? Historically, one or more parties to the decision (JCS, SecDef, and the President), as well as at least one external body (Commission on Roles and Missions) has judged that a hemispherical span of control was simply too great. The historical analysis, then, made the case that the option to create a single combatant commander without any subunified commands is not practical.

The historical review also showed how making SOUTHCOM a subunified command does not solve the unity of command problems at the seam, it just changes the command relationships from parallel to vertical, along with the bad baggage inherent in an unnecessary layer of delay and decision. Gains from a subunified command are marginal at best, and disadvantages include reduced prestige of the commander and the additional intervening layer to the President. In Latin America, where it is common for the military to have prominent roles in society and leadership, together with a more strata-conscious society the

prestige factor remains very important. In the Senate hearing noted above, Senator Bill Nelson also weighed in, observing that the commander of “Southern Command... has to be a diplomat, and has to engage almost on a daily basis with the heads of government of all these countries to protect the interests of the United States. And I just don't see how we combine a Northern... with a Southern Command.”<sup>55</sup> Since AMERCOM with a subunified command covering SOUTHCOM’s AOR is thus not practical, the outcome of the qualitative analysis indicates that the status quo is the appropriate solution, especially if JCS corrects the zipper seam.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The examination of UCP changes as they have affected SOUTHCOM provided the historical context for the current debate and illustrated the regularity of challenges to the existence and composition of the unified command. The review traced the arguments offered in the past. Many of these concerns had disappeared during the course of world events or UCP changes. Some still apply—most notably defense of the Panama Canal. Others have simply morphed over time: The narcoterrorist cartels have replaced the Soviet subversives as the main threat to Latin America stability. Historic factors reinforced the notion that the AOR warrants at least a subunified commander. On the other hand, previous studies had determined that the cost and billet savings of a subunified vice a unified command are minor and not worth the additional command layer and reduction of diplomatic effectiveness.

Selecting evaluation criteria from the many reports and studies involving the UCP as well as national strategy and joint doctrine yielded a comprehensive qualitative analysis framework. Applying this framework to the current SOUTHCOM debate demonstrated that

the command should remain an independent geographic unified command, while the boundaries between it and NORTHCOM should be altered to move Mexico and the Gulf of Mexico to SOUTHCOM and restoring the Caribbean Sea to its year 2000 boundary. Perhaps this qualitative analysis, when kept current with strategy and doctrine, may preclude further assaults on the independence of SOUTHCOM—challenges that, based upon the frequency of challenges in the past, probably will not be long in coming.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Press briefing of Wednesday, 17 April 2002. “Special Briefing on the Unified Command Plan,” presented by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld at the Pentagon. Co-briefer Chariman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Richard Myers. (7 May 2004) Available at <[http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2002/t04172002\\_t0417sd.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2002/t04172002_t0417sd.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> Speech of Thursday, 31 January 2002. “21<sup>st</sup> Century Transformation of U.S. Armed Forces,” by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld at the National Defense University, Fort McNair, Washington, DC. (7 May 2004) Available at <<http://www.defenselink.com>>.

<sup>3</sup> The events and dates on this chart came from the following sources: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, The History of the Unified Command Plan, 1946-1993 (Joint History Office, Washington, DC: February 1995), 12,15,20,26,38-40,44-46,70-74,79,80,82,83,105,106,112-116; John T. Quinn II, “Toward a New Strategic Framework: A Unified Command Plan for the New World Order,” (Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA: December, 1993), 68-70, 84, 86, 88, 89; Richard Davis, Briefing Report to the Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Committee on National Security, House of Representatives, Unified Command Plan: Atlantic and Southern Command Participation in 1995 Review (United States General Accounting Office, Washington, DC: 5 December 1996), 17; Department of Defense news release, Unified Command Plan (Department of Defense, Washington, DC: 7 October 1999), available at (7 May 2004) <[http://www.defenselink.mil/releases/1999/b10071999\\_bt470-99.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/releases/1999/b10071999_bt470-99.html)>; “Special Briefing on the Unified Command Plan.”

<sup>4</sup> Quinn, 118.

<sup>5</sup> History, 40.

<sup>6</sup> History, 38.

<sup>7</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report (Department of Defense, Washington, DC: 30 September 2001), 51. For more on defense transformation, see the capstone document Transformation Planning Guidance (Department of Defense, Washington, DC: April 2003), available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/brac/docs/transformationplanningapr03.pdf> and its predecessor Defense Reform Initiative Report (Department of Defense, Washington, DC: November 1997) available at (7 May 2004) <<http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/dodreform>>.

<sup>8</sup> Blue Ribbon Defense Panel, Report to the President and the Secretary of Defense on the Department of Defense: The Shifting Balance of Military Power (Department of Defense, Washington, DC: 1970), 57.

<sup>9</sup> History, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 43-46.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 82-83.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Shifting Balance, 57.

<sup>16</sup> History, 112.

<sup>17</sup> John P. White, Chairman of the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces, Directions for Defense: Report of the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington DC: 30 June 1995), 2-10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 2-12.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> National Defense Panel, Transforming Defense: National Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Department of Defense, Washington, DC: December 1997), 72.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen to Senator Strom Thurman (et. al.) 15 December 1997, forwarding letter for the report of the National Defense Panel, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Command Participation, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Defense news release, Unified Command Plan (Department of Defense, Washington, DC: 7 October 1999), (7 May 2004) Available at <[http://www.defenselink.mil/releases/1999/b10071999\\_bt470-99.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/releases/1999/b10071999_bt470-99.html)>.

<sup>27</sup> For an excellent summary of the changes as well as a review of issues remaining to be addressed, see W. Spencer Johnson, "New Challenges for the Unified Command Plan," Joint Force Quarterly, 31 (Summer 2002): 62-70.

<sup>28</sup> “Special Briefing on the Unified Command Plan.”

<sup>29</sup> "U.S. Cedes Panama Canal; Carter Heads U.S. Delegation." Facts On File World News Digest , 16 December 1999. FACTS.com. Facts On File News Services. (17 May 2004) <<http://www.2facts.com>>.

<sup>30</sup> Speech of Thursday, 18 March 2004. “Strategic Hemisphere Objectives for the Next Decade,” by General James T. Hill at the Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA. (7 May 2004) Available at <<http://www.southcom.com>>.

<sup>31</sup> Untitled speech of Wednesday, 3 March 2004 by General James T. Hill to the American Jewish Committee.

<sup>32</sup> Press briefing of Wednesday, 26 June 2002. Presented by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld at the Pentagon. Co-briefer Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Richard Myers. (7 May 2004) Available at <[http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2002/t06262002\\_t0626sd.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2002/t06262002_t0626sd.html)>.

<sup>33</sup> JCS memo of 25 March 2004, “Terms of Reference: USNORTHCOM – USSOUTHCOM Merger Study,” 2.

<sup>34</sup> JCS Joint Staff Action Processing Form attached to the draft TOR, approved by General Myer on 6 April 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Command Participation, 15.

<sup>36</sup> CDR Robert Sellers, SOUTHCOM J-5 Action Officer, phone interview by author, 4 May 2004. CDR Mark Dalton, JCS J-5 Action Officer, phone interview by author, 4 May 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Command Participation, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Directions for Defense, 2-12.

<sup>39</sup> Senator Charles S. Robb, “Examining Alternative UCP Structures,” Joint Force Quarterly, 14 (Winter 1996-97): 85-93.

<sup>40</sup> Directions for Defense, 2-12. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine for Joint Operations, Joint Pub 3-0 (Washington, DC: 10 September 2001). This factor drawn from Commission on Roles and Mission report as well as concepts from joint doctrine.

<sup>41</sup> The White House, The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC: 17 September 2002). Department of Defense, National Military Strategy: Shape, Respond, Prepare Now – A Military Strategy for a New Era (Washington, DC: September 1997). This factor drawn from principles in both documents.

<sup>42</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, Unified Action Armed Forces (UNAAF), Joint Pub 0-2 (Washington, DC: 10 July 2001): V-1.

<sup>43</sup> Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan, CJCSI 3110.01D, Washington, DC: 20 July 2001.

<sup>44</sup> Capt. Donald P. Loren, supporting staff member of the Commission on Roles on Missions of the Armed Forces, “The UCP: Time to Change,” U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings (August 1995): 11-14.

<sup>45</sup> “The World with Commanders’ Areas of Responsibility.” DefenseLink-Unified Command Plan. 22 April 2004. < <http://www.defenselink.mil/specials/unifiedcommand/>> [9 May 2004]. Edited to focus on the seam between NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM.

<sup>46</sup> See previously cited “Examining Alternative UCP Structures;” “New World Order;” Captain Robert C. Barnes, “Improving the Unified Command Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” (Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA: December, 1993); Lieutenant Colonel Kevin E. Leffler and Lieutenant Colonel W. Edward Ward, “The New Unified Command Plan,” (Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA: 15 April 1992).

<sup>47</sup> James F. Miskel, “‘Being There’ Matters—But Where?,” Naval War College Review (Summer 2001): 25-39.

<sup>48</sup> “Special Briefing on the Unified Command Plan.”

<sup>49</sup> JP 3-0, II-19,20.

<sup>50</sup> UNAAF, V-1.

<sup>51</sup> Command Arrangement Agreement between United States Northern Command and United States Southern Command of November 2003, signed by General Ralph E. Eberhart and General James T. Hill.

<sup>52</sup> Untitled speech of Wednesday, 3 March 2004 by General James T. Hill to the American Jewish Committee.

<sup>53</sup> National Security Strategy, 10. National Military Strategy, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Senator John Warner, “Statement,” U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services FY 2005 Budget: Defense Programs, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong, 2d sess., 1 April 2004, witnesses General James T. Hill, Commander, United States Southern Command; General Leon Laporte, Commander, United Nations Command and Republic of Korea/U.S. Combined Forces Command; and Admiral Thomas Fargo, Commander, United States Pacific Command, Washington, DC.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, Senator Bill Nelson.



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